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**Where does the prison
system go from here?**

Special Edition

Voices from the front line

Interview: Mother of a serving prisoner

Janet Brookes is the mother of a serving prisoner. She is interviewed by Christopher Stacey, Head of Projects and Services at UNLOCK, the National Association of Reformed Offenders.

Janet Brookes is the mother of a serving prisoner. Her son is serving a six year prison sentence for sexual and internet offences, which is his first time in prison. Her mother had been a Magistrate for many years and was shocked at the sentence. Janet has been in professional jobs in education, both in senior management and then in inspection and advice in schools. None of this had brought her anywhere near the judicial system. She writes to her son and visits him as often as possible with as many friends as are willing to go with her. is also trying to help him continue his education and sort out his finances, as his bank accounts were closed within a few weeks of sentencing. Her son has no partner or children.

CS: From your perspective, what are the effects of the fact that we are locking up increasing numbers of people in prison? What are the consequences for you of prisons being full?

JB: The main one is not being able to get on courses; you are never quite sure whether that is because there are so many prisoners and not enough courses, for example at last my son has been on a thinking skills course but he can't get on the offence-specific course, which follows on for more than six months. There is one sooner but it's full. It does seem that prisons are overloaded — prisoners are often locked up when they shouldn't be, and officers seem to have too much to do. Sometimes there has been a lack of response to my son's (perfectly reasonable) requests.

CS: Politicians often use the term 'Broken Society' Do you think this describes the world you or your relative come from?

JB: Not really. In the past I worked for a long time in education in an inner-city area, and we are very privileged in many ways in comparison. It's not really society but humanity that is broken here.

CS: Do you think prisons can help with social problems like unemployment, drug use and family breakdown?

JB: My son has Asperger's syndrome a personal problem but likely to lead to employment and relationship difficulties. Everything that happens in prison only seems to make things worse. I had imagined that we send people to prison because society needs keeping safe from them, but that in terms of the prisoner we would try and send them out better than when they came in, but it's impossible for me to see how the way that prisons are operating at the moment is doing that.

CS: Does imprisonment make it easier or harder for prisoners to make positive changes to your life?

JB: Imprisonment makes it harder. If they're in work, it takes away their job. If they have families, it causes immense stresses — I can't imagine what it must be like for those with children who have their fathers taken away from them. All our friends and family are working hard to visit, to write and to keep in touch so that there will be a network for my son when he comes out, as life will be harder than ever for him then. He is not very far away fortunately — I dread him being moved away.

I knew nothing about prisons before and I really ought to have done. Here I am, a left-wing member of the middle-classes and I knew nothing about it, and I'm appalled by what I've experienced. Prisons should be able to help with problems, but my experience suggests that it doesn't. The courses my son has at last been on may help make some change. After he was arrested, whilst on bail, he had a lot of therapy paid for by me, and a lot he is getting now is repeated. It feels too little too late. Perhaps it's not too little, but perhaps it's not at the teachable moment. As an educator I couldn't believe that this didn't happen before he got into trouble.

CS: The Government wants to achieve what it is calling a 'rehabilitation revolution'. From your point of view, what are the areas where more could be done to help prisoners go straight on release?

JB: When my son went in, the first thing anybody ever said to me was, 'we'll look after him and we can work with him'. I was so relieved and I thought it was good. But then nothing positive happened at all for almost a year. All the right noises seemed to be being made, and I read all this positive stuff in *The Guardian*, but it's not borne out in practice.

I've read about prisons which have amazing rehabilitation programmes and employment opportunities, and that's what I would do if I was a prison governor, keep them busy! My son was part-way through his degree before prison, and I understood education was fundamental in prison, but there has been zero. He hasn't been able to get on an Open University degree.

I don't really know what's going to be available on release, but I have heard about the Quaker Circles of Support Programme, and I'm hoping something like that will be available for my son. He's very worried

about being recalled. I fear what it's going to be like when he comes out, but there is a growing number of support organisations; anything where all of the services, churches etc work together and with the families to help the person sounds a good idea — joined up thinking.

CS: What kind of work or training do you think could be introduced to prisons?

JB: Absolutely anything, including the opportunity to use and develop the skills they have. I feel sure that as a society we should regard it as a priority to provide appropriate work and training. If we don't we are giving ourselves a bigger problem than we started with.

CS: Would you welcome the opportunity for your relative to 'pay something back' to the community for your crimes, either financially, through some kind of unpaid work, or by meeting their victim?

JB: I have no problem with that, and neither would my son. Even if he had a job on release, to do voluntary work as well would be fine. He loves being part of a team and contributing to society. He would willingly participate in that. Any kind of community payback sounds like a really good idea.

CS: How has the experience of prisoners shifted in recent years?

JB: I'm not too sure, but for example, prisoners having televisions seems a good idea for whiling away the hours and days, and at least it's a way of keeping them in touch with the outside world — they would be cut off otherwise.

CS: How have services for prisoners families changed in recent years? How do you think they could be improved?

JB: Everything that I have had, and I have had some help, has been from the charities like PACT — they're brilliant. But there isn't anything like that at the prison where my son is, it's a rural one so I've had to come back to these other organisations. It seems the charities are all focused on doing their little bit, helping you with one thing or another, lots of small charities beavering away on their own, and the umbrella organisation Action for Prisoners Families seems like a really good idea.

The easiest thing the prisons could do is to give families information — I don't see why you have to tease out information about everything, whether it is visiting, sending in money or whatever. I got something from the local prison when my son first went in but it

was 50 pages long. PACT produced something which wasn't too bad but it actually didn't reflect the reality of the prison. When he moved to the prison where he is now there was nothing, so I had to start all over again. They said 'you can always ask', and when I did ask they were usually courteous and usually gave an answer, but why you should have to winkle out all of this information I just don't know. They could do something that covers the routine, this is what you can send in, this is what the visiting process is — it's not rocket science. In my son's prison, there is a notice board that you stand facing when you are waiting to be let out after the visit, which includes the mission statement of the prison, which bears no relation to what I see going on and gives the name of a person you can contact. I

have wanted to contact them and tried to ring — I spent half an hour trying to trace them before I discovered this person was no longer employed, and there is nobody in that post anymore. Nobody had a clue. Although that person had already left — that phone number and name is still there now. So not only can you not get information, but there is out of date information being provided.

CS: Have you come across the Offenders Families Helpline, which is funded by NOMS?

JB: Yes, I have, because I have been talking to them about some of the difficulties that I've

had. But what it doesn't do is tell you about the individual prison — you have to find it all out yourself.

CS: What are the aspects of being the relative of a prisoner that people outside are least aware of?

JB: I think the sense of stigma as a family member, and having had things in the press, some of it invented, and you've got no right of reply, and you're under all the weight of this stuff being put around — that's appalling. My friends know because they went through it with me but in general people don't know how appalling that is. After some months I did learn to laugh again and enjoy myself, but for example a neighbour who'd heard me outside enjoying the evening with friends said how glad she was that I'd moved on but as we talked she suddenly said 'it's still a live issue for you isn't it', and I said 'yes, every day'. I'm dealing with stuff all the time, whether it is dealing with his bank account, or his OASys report, you can't put it down. The effects on people with children, or the breadwinner going into prison, must be awful.

I feel sure that as a society we should regard it as a priority to provide appropriate work and training. If we don't we are giving ourselves a bigger problem than we started with.

CS: An increasing number of prisons are potentially to be managed by private companies in the near future and there will be potentially wider opportunities for the voluntary and charitable sector. What are the benefits and risks of these changes for you?

JB: I don't know — I heard some of the programmes may be run in different places and I was afraid, in the short term, that it might mean my son would be moved further away, but I'd worry about that with any organisation. I suppose my main concern would be that the people who run them actually know what they're trying to do, and that as a society we know what we're trying to do, that the principles and outcomes we're after are laid down, so that whoever is running them might actually achieve the right ends. I'm thinking about schools going into private hands; I'm not sure whether we have a corporate view of what we're trying to do in education, with it all becoming fragmented. It could be the same in prisons.

CS: What do you think are the biggest problems in the prison system?

JB: The biggest problem is we don't know what we're trying to do, and so we're not doing it. The picture is very confused. As an outsider, this is the biggest problem — we need to decide what prison is for and what the best way is to achieve the ends, and then do it. Another problem is that, though I can understand that there are a lot of prisoners who are very difficult, where you have a Category C prison and you have people who are not difficult, who want to sort themselves out and make a contribution to society, I think they could be treated more constructively.

CS: What are the things that get in the way of prisons being more like you would want them to be?

JB: Imagination, and perhaps also a lack of funds. There are entrenched attitudes as well in some of the staff. One of my friends, a very upright man, who has found this whole business with my son very difficult, nevertheless asked to visit, which was quite a big deal. He was appalled that one of the officers in charge of the visiting room was sitting there with his feet on the desk. The whole idea that the prison was not run professionally with people meeting professional standards was a huge shock to him.

CS: If you could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of the prison service, what would it be?

JB: Well I think we are back to what I mentioned before — decide what we are doing, decide what the right course of action is, recruit the right sort of attitudes, train the people in the skills to do it — it's straight out of a management textbook but that is what I believe. The officers could be much more active, they seem so passive at the moment. They lock them up, and then they don't do anything.

Fundamentally, I believe most people in prison are there because society has screwed them up, or let them down, or failed them in some way. I don't actually believe

that most people are there because they are wicked — perhaps when I think of some high-intelligence person in finance who has defrauded millions then I think maybe that is wicked, and they should just be punished (but I still think about the effect on the families), but most of them have so many other social issues. If we spent more time working out what has gone wrong we could maybe unravel it more effectively.

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